

# Regional and global responses to the crisis in Myanmar

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The 2025 ANU Myanmar Keynote featured Professor Surakiart Sathirathai, 30 April 2025  
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Since the military coup on 1 February 2021, the crisis in Myanmar has ravaged the country, creating a humanitarian disaster with far-reaching repercussions on regional peace and security. This year, 2025, is in many respects a crucial juncture for Myanmar where we can either enhance the prospects of peace or lose the chance for peace.

The conflict in Myanmar is deeply rooted. It is not only about the taking over of the country's administration by the military junta alone. Myanmar, or Burma as it was previously known, has been mired since its independence in 1948 in what is considered one of the longest civil conflicts in the world.

It is a story of three ongoing struggles. First, the long-standing struggle, even before independence, of the ethnic groups in Myanmar for autonomy and self-determination. The recent earthquake in Myanmar was caused by a major geological fault running through the country. But we need to be mindful that Myanmar, politically, is a country with many fault lines, with more than 100 ethnic groups and minorities grouped into "national races": Burman, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.

Second, the struggle of the Myanmar military, or the Tatmadaw, to maintain its primacy over the politics and society of the country. Whether we like it or not, the military forces of Myanmar see themselves as the guardian of the nation and the only institution that can hold the country together.

Third, the continued struggle of the people for democracy, which has intensified with the military seizure of power in February 2021, bringing to an abrupt halt Myanmar's

democratisation and leading many young people to join the pro-democracy civil disobedience movement, with many taking up arms in the name of the People's Defence Force.

What is more, the military coup in February 2021 has driven the pro-democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and the main ethnic armed organisations to join in a loose coalition under the banner of the National Unity Government, or the NUG, the so-called parallel government of the opposition.

The deep roots and complexity of the conflict in Myanmar mean that efforts to achieve lasting and sustainable peace will require a solution that addresses these ongoing struggles that the country has had to grapple with since, and even before, its independence.

Things have not gone their way for the Myanmar military, or what is called the State Administrative Council (SAC), which is the official name of the military regime set up after the coup. The Myanmar military has suffered many demoralising defeats on the battlefield, losing as much as 50% of the country's territory. However, most of the major cities and townships in the heartland of the country are still controlled by the SAC.

The resistance forces, comprising various ethnic organisations and the People's Defence Force, have had decisive successes on the ground, gaining control over the other 50% of the country's territory, especially along the border areas. But they are also hard-pressed by having to administer these territories and deliver on the basic needs of the local communities. While the resistance groups coordinate militarily and are very successful in gaining international support, there is still a lack of unity on the political front under the NUG, reflecting very different political agendas and objectives.

On the economic front, the economy has gone into a tailspin. Economic growth has contracted. The currency has lost much of its value. Inflation continues to rise, and over 70% of the population is reportedly living under the poverty line, with over three million people internally displaced. The humanitarian crisis is very dire, and humanitarian actions have been restricted by the limited access imposed by the SAC. The crisis has become even worse due to the widespread devastation caused by the recent massive earthquake.

The crisis has also had tremendous spillover effects on neighbouring countries, especially Thailand, as displaced persons flee the fighting raging along the border. Of growing concern is the proliferation of illegal and illicit activities along the border

areas with China and Thailand. These activities range from illegal gambling, the outflow of drugs and narcotics, human trafficking and scam operations that prey upon victims worldwide.

The Myanmar crisis is a test case of ASEAN's much-touted centrality and credibility. ASEAN's long-held principle of non-interference needs to be applied in a much more flexible manner because the situation has regional ramifications. And we are all very much aware that when it comes to gross violations of human rights, these are matters of universal concern. So, the principle of non-interference, in my view, cannot and should not be applied in this particular case. This case is indeed of regional concern. It is indeed of international concern.

ASEAN has called for a ceasefire, dialogue, and humanitarian assistance, but has not done much to determine how lasting peace can prevail in Myanmar. The five-point consensus that ASEAN established in 2021 has made, in my view, very little progress, if any at all. Much of this is due to the lack of continuity in its implementation as the chair of ASEAN, and the Special Envoy, rotates every year.

What is the way forward for Myanmar? Having served as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister overseeing foreign affairs, it has been my belief that diplomatic statecraft requires us to be creative and innovative, thinking out of the box. Sometimes the stars begin to align, and we must sense and seize the opportunity. It will not happen unless we make it happen.

I believe that 2025 will be a crucial year for peace in Myanmar. It is a year in which we must, all of us, come to terms with the realities in Myanmar.

First, a military victory, to me, is inconceivable. It would lead to greater costs and more suffering for the people of Myanmar.

Second, the SAC should not be under any illusion that an election held unilaterally without inclusive dialogue will lead to peace. It will likely lead to more violence, more hostilities, more divisions and fragmentation within Myanmar. Such an election will also not be recognised as credible by the majority of the international community.

Third, if all sides are willing to give peace a chance, then the election could be the opportunity for inclusive dialogue between SAC and the key parties in the opposition. This will require political will on all sides, for without efforts towards dialogue and reconciliation, progress towards peace cannot be achieved.

Fourth, all the major external players, be it ASEAN, China, India, other neighbouring countries and important partners like Australia, must be on the same page and must be actively engaged in encouraging, persuading and nurturing all parties towards

defining the dialogue.

Realistically, peace in Myanmar remains elusive, yet we should not give up on our hopes or give up on the people of Myanmar. We must also bear in mind what kind of peace we seek for Myanmar. It must be a sustainable peace that addresses the root causes of the conflict, which predate the current crisis. We must recognise that peace entails a process, and that the first step is crucial, leading to subsequent steps that could be building blocks toward the ultimate goal of sustainable peace.

Obviously, the peace process must be Myanmar-led and Myanmar-owned. But, all of us who wish to see an end to the conflict and the suffering of the Myanmar people must do our part in action, not just in words.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/regional-and-global-responses-to-the-crisis-in-myanmar-20250521/>